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Offenders find help at county drug court

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As a spike in deadly overdoses makes it clear that there's still a significant drug problem in Ocean County, there is one government program that a rare alliance of forces — law enforcement, drug treatment providers and politicians — hopes can make a difference.

Instead of putting drug addicts in prison, the drug court program, which was started in 2002, gives people convicted of nonviolent drugrelated crimes the chance to get treatment.

"I used drugs for 20 years. I'm 46 years old and I'd had it," said Linda who lives in Manahawkin and is 18 months into her sentence for possession of drugs with intent to sell. She said she went from drinking and smoking pot in her 20s to freebasing cocaine in her 30s. For the past three years she was using drugs, she was hooked on heroin and methadone.

In 2003, she sold drugs to an undercover cop. She faced a life altering choice when police officers pulled her over a year and a half ago and discovered the 2003 warrant for her arrest.

"I was miserable," she said. "They told me about drug court and I was grateful. I knew I was not going to be able to do it on my own."

Drug court combines a rigorous addiction treatment regimen with intensive supervision. Participants must be determined to be drug dependent by treatment experts and declared legally eligible for the program, based on the type of offense, by a judge.

"Drug court paid for rehab for me for eight months," Linda said. "And then they paid for a halfway house for three months. You know how much rehab is today. I could never have afforded it." If she had not chosen drug court, she faced five years in prison.

After coming out of residential treatment, participants must go through four phases before they "graduate" from the program. They are supervised for as many as five years and in the first phase they have to visit the drug court once per week, see their probation officer once per week, go to outpatient meetings at least three times per week and submit to random drug tests and home visits from their probation

officers. Participants also have to hold a full-time job, be enrolled in school or be actively looking for work.

"Drug court is a great thing," said Robert A. Gasser, executive assistant prosecutor in the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office. Gasser is largely responsible for getting a drug court in Ocean County. "It saves money and it gets people the help they need so they don't commit

Stock Market	more crimes."
National	more erimes.
Technology	
Science & Nature	Although studies have shown a range of results, one study commissioned by the National Institute of Justice found that 58.6 percent of
ENTERTAINMENT	offenders who were imprisoned for drug offenses were rearrested within the second year. The rate of reconvictions for drug court graduates in New Jersey for new crimes within three years of graduation was only 6 percent.
Casillos	
Nightlife	
	There are currently 160 participants in Ocean County's drug court and the county has a retention rate of 61 percent, according to Carole L.
Dining Out	Martin, the county's drug court coordinator. Retention includes people who have successfully completed the program and those who are
Movies	currently participating in it.
LIFE	
Health & Fitness	During the first seven months of the year, there were 53 fatal overdoses in Ocean County; during the same period in 2005, there were 33.
Home & Garden	During the first seven months of the year, there were 33 fatal overdoses in Ocean County, during the same period in 2003, there were 33.
Food & Wine	
	On Monday, Judge Barbara A. Villano, who presides over the drug court, had 31 drug court participants, some in their early 20s, others in
	their late 50s, seated before her. Each man was called before the judge to talk about his progress. With few exceptions, the men listened to
Aging	the proceedings and progress of the other program participants, murmuring their opinions to one another.
For women	
Religion	
	Ronald was told that there was some concern from his counselors that he didn't speak up enough in group and was asked if he would be
I IIO IO OALLEINI	more comfortable sharing his thoughts in one-on-one sessions. Kevin got a round of applause from the other men when the judge told him
	that he would be graduating from phase one to phase two. "Better late than never," he said with a grin. Jean was told he could get a letter
	from the court testifying to his progress for an upcoming child custody hearing.
Wire Galleries	
NIE	Villano chided all of the men to improve some aspects of their lives and congratulated them for their accomplishments. All of the men
	were struggling to make ends meet, holding down blue-collar jobs. Many were making payments to the court, paying child support and
	paying off debts incurred during past years.
Daily Crossword	paying off debts incurred during past years.
	"It's hard. It's humbling," said A.J., a lanky 31-year-old who entered the program in December 2003 after being charged with drug
Register	possession. "I've watched people come and go." A.J. used heroin and cocaine and was in a residential treatment center for six months.
News Archive Syndication	
Press Jobs	Residential treatment, usually prescribed for several months, costs \$14,600 for six months, according to Tammy Kendig, spokeswoman
	for the state Judiciary. Outpatient treatment costs an average of \$2,300 per person. Incarceration costs \$37,000 per year per prisoner.
ADVERTIOE	for the state Judiciary. Outpatient treatment costs an average of \$2,300 per person. Incarceration costs \$37,000 per year per prisoner.
2006 Media Kit	
B 1 E 4 4 BB 41 1	"Drug court is the best thing that ever happened to me," Linda said. "My family is so proud of me. This is the longest I've ever been
Real Estate Monthly	clean."
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